

Closing Remarks: What Is Our Project?

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At CHI 2006, I had the interesting experience of presenting a paper on ethnography and design that seemed to touch many nerves (Dourish, 2006). Both at the conference, and in virtual settings like the “anthrodesign” email list, a flood of discussion accompanied what were, to my mind, not particularly new observations about the nature of ethnographic work in technological contexts. The topic was clearly more fraught than I had imagined.

In the spirit (loosely) of Tsing’s “Friction” (Tsing, 2005), I am intrigued by the disciplinary frictions by which engagements between ethnographic praxis and other disciplinary approaches gain traction, and intrigued too by the different local forms by which such “global” disciplines such as computer science, anthropology, design, and ethnography are brought together in situated and particular effective hybrids.

In the CHI 2006 paper, this manifested itself with a concern with the ways in which theory and analytic positioning, and particularly the notion of ethnographic data being generated in the encounter between ethnographer and site, had been submerged or elided in the forms of ethnographic reportage that are published in that community. My concern was not with implications for design per se, but rather with the rhetorical strategies by which ethnographic insight was made relevant to design communities, and the disciplinary power relations that govern such an engagement.

In more recent (unpublished) work conducted along with Phoebe Sengers, Kirsten Boehner, and Janet Vertesi at Cornell, I have been considering similar questions at work in the uptake of “cultural probes” as a mechanism for HCI inquiry. Since the publication of the original paper on the use of cultural probes by designers from the Royal College of Art working in the EU project “Presence” (Gaver et al., 1999) probes have seen a remarkable level of uptake in the HCI community. This uptake has been accompanied by a considerable amount of adaptation and transformation, often in ways that are fundamentally antithetical to the original intent of the probes work. Similarly, to the extent that probes are used as a data gathering instrument, their use has much in common with the transformation of ethnography in the production of new disciplinary hybrids.

In our investigation, we have not been setting out to adjudicate the “correctness of various interpretations of probes. Instead, our approach has been to take both the rapid uptake of the probes and the sorts of transformation that have emerged as symptomatic of deeper concerns about “multi-methods” in HCI. In particular, we argue that the

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fundamental challenge that probes offer is not methodological but epistemological. In contrast to traditional engineering models which frame the relationship between designer and user in ways that deny agency to both, we argue that probes essentially offer an alternative account of knowledge production in HCI.

This is, similarly, the fundamental project for ethnographic praxis in industrial and design contexts, and the emergence of the EPIC conference and community is a heartening development. A question that we all continually grapple with is the visibility of the core of the ethnographic process in our work, and the extent to which our conceptual and epistemological commitments are visible to clients, colleagues, and collaborators. Building on the experiences of ethnography and cultural probes in HCI, I would argue that it is critically important that these be part of the conversation. Where ethnography can have a truly transformative impact into design practice, it is not by providing new or “better” data, but by reframing the nature of the engagement between design and use.

References

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